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ABSTRACT

The role of counseling is especially important in junior colleges, with their wide range of courses and diverse student population. It must be determined whether or not junior college counselors should practice "psychotherapy" and to what extent they should be academic advisors. The first aim of counseling is to help students to make decisions; the personal adjustment of the student must be considered when resolving vocational problems. Since many junior college students need psychotherapeutic help, colleges may wish to have one or more psychologists on their counseling staffs. The inadequacy of most faculty academic advisement programs has been demonstrated; it is suggested that the counselor can get to know the student better if he also acts as academic advisor. However, there is no data proving that the counselor provides the student with more accurate academic information than the faculty advisor. It is also doubtful that the counselor has time to perform both duties well. At Meramec Community College, St. Louis, an academic advisement program prepares personnel with intensive in-service training. They then act as academic advisors, with close supervision by the counselors. An alternative, using programmed materials, allows students to prepare their own programs. The author feels that professional counselors should spend most of their time helping students with developmental problems. (MS)

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SOME COMMENTS ON THE ROLE OF JUNIOR COLLEGE COUNSELORS

by

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Statements of junior college philosophy have long acknowledged a fundamental commitment to the idea that guidance plays an important part in the total educational endeavor. Guidance experts generally agree that the counseling service provides the basic elements necessary for any guidance program to be effective. The emergence of the comprehensive community college with its wide range of educational options and diverse student population has tended to further emphasize the importance of the counseling function.

At the present time, however, there is evidence of considerable skepticism at all levels of education regarding the significance of counseling contributions to the educational process. The junior colleges are not without their share of critics who are opposed to guidance in general and counseling in particular. One leading educator has even predicted that counselors will have no legitimate functions to perform in the junior college of the future![1] Much of the current disenchantment with counseling in our junior colleges appears to be the result of efforts to resolve various questions related to the problem of determining what constitutes the proper role of counselors. Collins has summarized many of these concerns over counselor role in an excellent article in which he makes a strong case that junior college counselors should focus primarily on vocational counseling.[2]

There are at least two readily identifiable and important questions which must be answered in attempting to define an appropriate role for junior college counselors. These two questions may be stated in the following manner: (1) Should counselors engage in activities which might be considered psychotherapy? and (2) Should counselors spend a substantial portion of their time performing the academic advising function?

Discussions related to the first question of whether or not counselors should practice psychotherapy as part of their service to students often tend to generate highly emotional responses. Most administrators and other junior college educators not directly connected with counseling or student personnel work answer this question with an emphatic NO! The present writer would agree with this conclusion if counselors engaging in psychotherapeutic activities are devoting all or most of their time and energies to working with only a few severely disturbed individuals. Counselors should be available to help all students -- not just the few.

However, in the minds of many people this negative reaction to counselors performing psychotherapy extends beyond psychotherapy to include all kinds of so-called personal adjustment counseling. This latter attitude implies a definite misunderstanding of what counseling is all about. Counseling is primarily concerned with the decision making process and it is often imperative that personal adjustment concerns, such as conflict with parents or other authority figures, be discussed

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and dealt with in helping students resolve problems of vocational decision or choice of college major. The personal concerns of students can hardly be excluded from the decision making process if we expect the resultant choices to be both objectively realistic and personally satisfying. It can be further argued that short-term counseling aimed at helping students cope with normal adjustment problems may enable these students to more effectively benefit from the educational process, even when the problems involved are not primarily of an educational or vocational nature.

In view of the fact that substantial numbers of junior college students are in need of psychotherapeutic help, some colleges may wish to consider the possibility of including one or more doctoral level clinical or counseling psychologists as members of their counseling staffs. These highly trained psychologists could serve both as consultants in the mental health area for the total college community and as resource persons accepting referrals from counselors who are either less well trained or who do not wish to work with difficult personal adjustment cases. This type of arrangement would seem to offer promise in facilitating the implementation of referrals. Some students in need of help absolutely refuse to accept referrals to resource people who are external to the college.

This question concerning the place of psychotherapy in our junior colleges must be answered by counseling staff members and administrators of individual colleges. It cannot and should not be answered for the junior college movement as a whole. Individual colleges must arrive at their own decisions while taking into account such considerations as the demonstrated needs of the student body, the number of students per counselor, the qualifications of individual counselors in terms of training and experience, etc. From the vantage point of this writer, the two principle obstacles to reasonable resolutions of this problem are presented by (1) overly cautious administrators who fear that all "personal" counseling is really psychotherapy in disguise, and (2) overly enthusiastic counselors who, in spite of limited training, perceive of themselves as junior Freudian "analysts."

The second question or area of concern is related to the question of what role junior college counselors should be performing with respect to the academic advising function. Consideration of this question seems especially critical at this time due to a current trend toward assigning more and more responsibility for this function to counselors. In many colleges the responsibility for academic advisement resides exclusively with counselors. This general tendency to delegate additional advising responsibilities to counselors is usually encouraged by administrators and teaching faculty while counselors have been markedly ineffective in their attempts to resist such arrangements.

The rationale which is presented in justification of using counselors to perform the academic advising function tends to vary from college to college. I suspect that one very prevalent reason for advocating this approach, though rarely stated publicly, is to serve the purposes of administrative expediency. It is readily apparent that organizational problems will be substantially diminished by having ten full-time counselors perform a task, such as academic advisement, which might otherwise be spread over a hundred or more faculty members. This kind of motivation probably accounts for a number of such decisions which are publicly justified through the use of more educationally acceptable reasons.

The public justifications for saddling counselors with major or exclusive responsibilities for academic advisement usually have reference to some very real concerns which junior college educators have for the welfare of their students.

One major concern can be traced to the fact that responsible educators recognize the need which junior college students have for reliable sources of assistance in the crucial task of selecting academic programs which fit their individual needs and aspirations. These same educators also recognize the ineffectiveness which has been demonstrated by the vast majority of faculty advising programs. There is a general concensus of opinion that as a total group, members of the teaching faculty perform miserably when attempting to advise students relative to course selection, proper sequencing of courses, graduation requirements, etc. The inadequacies of faculty advising systems are probably due to various problems ranging from a lack of good inservice training programs to real disinterest on the part of some advisors in the task to be performed. Whatever the causes, the failure of faculty advising programs to perform adequately in carrying out this important task is undoubtedly a major consideration in many decisions to assign the bulk of the advising responsibility to counselors.

Another major concern stems from the problems involved in getting students to take optimal advantage of the counseling services which are available. It is often suggested that the individual student will feel more comfortable in approaching a counselor for help with personal problems if he has previously had contacts of a more routine nature with the counselor. The regularly scheduled interviews usually incorporated into the academic advisement process are seen as helping the student become better acquainted with his counselor and therefore less fearful in asking for counseling help. Another argument related to this same problem and often presented by advocates of this approach is that counselors are provided with useful opportunities for the identification of students who could benefit from additional counseling. Supposedly, the advisement interview presents the client with a non-threatening situation in which he can ask for further help and at the same time affords the sensitive counselor an opportunity to offer his services to less aggressive students who manifest symptoms indicating the need for some additional counseling.

There is ample reason to believe that faculty advising systems have failed to provide junior college students with adequate academic advisement services. Also, there can be little doubt that having counselors handle the academic advisement function will increase the total number of counselor-student contacts and in some cases facilitate the initiation of actual counseling contacts. It appears that these arguments lend considerable support for the position that counselors should assume major if not complete responsibility for academic advisement. However, before we reach a firm decision that counselors are the logical candidates to perform this function, there are some pertinent questions to which we should direct our attention. The reader should realize that it will not be possible to answer these questions to the satisfaction of everyone concerned.

(1) Do counselors actually provide students with the most accurate, relevant, and up-to-date information available regarding graduation requirements, course prerequisites, probationary policies, proper sequencing of courses, transfer requirements, etc.? Although there is no conclusive research evidence available, many junior college

educators assume that counselors do a better job of providing accurate information to students than do faculty advisors. Since there is a paucity of data in this area, this assumption is almost exclusively based on empirical observation. There is a critical need for some hardnosed research aimed at answering the question of what academic advisement method enables students to receive the best possible information on which they can base decisions concerning course selection.

Even if there were research evidence available to support the belief that counselors provide better information to students than do faculty members, we would still not know, with any real degree of confidence, why this should be the case. It certainly would not be due to any specialized training which the counselor has had in this area. Because of its transitory and geographical nature, the kind of information used in academic advisement is, for the most part, not included in the course content of counselor education programs. A more plausible explanation for the likelihood that counselors do provide better information is the fact that individual counselors spend many, many hours in ferreting out current and reliable education information. If time spent researching educational requirements should prove to be the deciding factor then we must decide whether this is a desirable way for professional counselors to spend their time.

(2) Is the professionally trained counselor being used to best advantage when serving as an academic advisor? School counselors have been trained to help students make decisions and work through developmental problems. On the basis of research evidence concerning the tendencies of junior college students to enroll in programs for which they lack adequate academic backgrounds, make frequent changes of curriculum, and drop out at a relatively high rate, it would seem readily apparent that one of the primary needs in terms of the decision-making process is for vocational counseling. Vocational counseling, at least when performed in a competent and professional manner, is a time-consuming process. It is, however, a process which should often precede that of academic advisement.

In addition to the time-consuming nature of vocational counseling, the heavy demands on counselor time during academic advisement periods may make it impossible for the counselor to conduct counseling interviews with students when they most need and desire help. His time is often too heavily scheduled with advisement interviews to allow him to see any students for more than the required advisement interview. It is not unusual for a student who asks for help with a vocational problem during the course of a routine advisement interview to wait a number of weeks before receiving the help requested. This is sometimes the case even when the student's problem involves the necessity for making a vocational decision which is crucial to the selection of a course program.

There is also ample evidence that junior college students manifest a higher incidence of social and personal maladjustment than do students in other educational settings.[3] This would seem to indicate a critical need for short-term counseling, both group and individual, aimed at helping junior college students work through various personal and situational difficulties. If counselors are loaded down with academic advisement responsibilities, they will be unable to adequately meet the vocational and personal counseling needs of students. Both counselor training and the needs of students seem to indicate that counselors could be used to better advantage than as academic advisors. It is extremely doubtful that the benefits gained in additional numbers

of counseling contacts will outweigh the long-range losses under a system which employs professional counselors to perform the bulk of academic advisement.

(3) Do academic advisement interviews really facilitate actual counseling contacts? Again, as in the case of the first question, empirical observation may lend tentative support to an affirmative answer. It is highly probable that some counseling contacts do occur as a result of advisement interviews. However, there are also some characteristics of academic advisement interviews which undoubtedly tend to hinder this process. Academic advisement interviews are often so short, usually fifteen to thirty minutes, that it is very difficult even for the best of professionally trained counselors to identify those students who are in need of additional counseling. In addition to the brief nature of these contacts, the counselor-advisor usually sees twenty to forty students per day. This combination of factors makes the usual academic advisement interview a source of frustration for both advisor and student. Any counselor who has undergone this experience of seeing one student right after another, each for short periods of time and extending over a long workday, knows how frustrating this process can become. He is further aware that under these conditions it is very difficult to do anything more than check the accuracy of the course selections made by the student.

In addition to the above characteristics, there is also the effect which academic advisement interviews have on the student's image of the counselor. In many instances, the student is seen at least once in an academic advisement interview by a counselor prior to his enrollment in college and thereafter a minimum of one time during each succeeding semester. There is a strong tendency on the part of students who see their college counselors regularly in an advising capacity to categorize the counselor almost exclusively as one to whom you turn only when educational information is needed or desired. This image is not conducive to self-referral counseling contacts and greatly hampers the counselor in his attempt to offer a full range of counseling services to the students in his college.

(4) Are there currently available workable alternatives to the use of professional counselors as academic advisors? This writer believes there is currently available at least one workable alternative which may, in fact, be even more efficient and effective than those programs which use either counselors or faculty members as academic advisors.

A campus of the Junior College District of St. Louis -- St. Louis County, Meramec Community College, has recently implemented an academic advisement program making use of paraprofessional personnel. This program utilizes persons who often have not been trained for specific positions in the job market, but who do possess high levels of ability in terms of interpersonal relationships. Candidates for positions in this program were usually college graduates, although this was not considered a requirement. Some college experience may facilitate the process of preparing these people to function as academic advisors.

Once on the job these paraprofessionals are given intensive in-service training in basic counseling procedures, referral techniques, and academic advisement information. After the in-service training

phase ends and they begin to actually function as educational advisors, they are provided with close supervision by members of the counseling staff. Preliminary evidence indicates that students are at least as satisfied with these paraprofessional advisors as they are with professionally trained counselors serving as academic advisors. Anyone considering such a program should recognize that the careful selection of personnel, a good in-service training program and careful supervision are the key ingredients necessary for successful implementation.

These educational specialists perform many other useful functions such as the collection and dissemination of transfer information, the up-dating of occupational information files, etc. Having these extremely time-consuming jobs handled by paraprofessionals enables the professional counselor to devote more time to counseling students.

Another alternative possibility involves the use of programmed materials which would allow many students to prepare their own academic programs. The use of programmed materials could very possibly be more efficient and effective for some students than are current methods of academic advisement. There is even some research evidence available indicating that many university students prefer to make up their own schedules, and not be involved with academic advisors, faculty or counselors.[4] Possibly we have been overlooking the ability which many students have to advise themselves with respect to course selection. The use of programmed materials would undoubtedly be most effective as a supplement to some other advising system rather than as an exclusive method of making advisory help available.

It is evident from the preceding discussion that there are presently no conclusive answers to the problems of counselor role as posed in this paper. However, on the basis of this discussion, I would like to offer my own interpretations.

First of all, junior college counselors should not try to behave like junior psychiatrists. They should, however, spend the major portion of their time helping students resolve various developmental problems which are not indicative of serious emotional maladjustment. This is necessary if each student is to have the opportunity to develop and benefit from his academic potential.

Secondly, there are many reasons for resisting the current tendency of increasing counselor involvement in the academic advisement process. It is my opinion that the arguments in opposition to this tendency are more crucial and outweigh those in favor, especially when applied to the long range goal of meeting student needs. The direct participation of counselors in academic advisement should be kept at a minimum, allowing them to concentrate on the task for which they have been trained--counseling students.

I would like to urge all junior college educators who are in a position to influence the future directions of guidance programs to seriously reevaluate their current beliefs. Counselors can perform significant and worthwhile services for students only if allowed to do so. Educators in positions of responsibility should endeavor to provide maximum opportunity for counselors to counsel students. The evidence indicates that junior college students, even more than other groups of students, are in need of the kinds of help which professional counselors have been trained to give.

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